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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a historical overview of the gradual shift in the moral and philosophical foundations of American society as reflected in the content of textbooks. Working from the premise that textbooks mirror changing social values, the paper cites various studies that trace the trend, over the past 200 years, away from an emphasis on religious principles and appropriate social behavior toward an emphasis on understanding and amusement. After presenting examples of arguments by prominent American and British thinkers both for and against this trend toward secular humanism, the paper describes the current diversity of public opinion on the controversial issue of textbook content. Quoting extensively from a study conducted by Paul C. Vitz, the paper reports that most of today's textbooks neglect the history of religion and the portrayal of traditional family values, sex roles, the work ethic, and patriotism. The paper cites another source in support of this study and concludes with (1) a brief review of predictions by some social scientists and (2) an appeal to educators to reassess the values and foundations underlying current reform movements. (IW)

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# Public School Textbooks: Reflections of a Shift in the Philosophical Foundations of American Education?

A Paper Presented at the Thirty-fifth Annual Meeting
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Public School Textbooks: Reflections of a Shift in the Philosophical Foundations of American Education?

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The National Council for the Social Studies recently devoted an entire issue of its journal, Social Education, to an analysis of how contemporary school textbooks treat four world regions--Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. The exploration was based on the premise that the textbook was perhaps the single most important resource for the classroom teacher K-12 and that "heavy reliance" upon this tool made it an instrumental force for stereotyping and myth-making, as well as for increasing understanding and insight. The research studies cited persuasively support the argument that authors "are influenced by nationalism, ethnocentrism, their own socialization, the current political climate and other related factors."[1] The persistent influence of these barriers to obtaining a global perspective, notwithstanding contrary rational and academic desires, establishes textbooks as significant mirrors of personal and social commitment. Authors and publishers, even when they try, are seldom able to hide the controlling context from themselves or others. The marketplace is not a neutral zone. Textbooks appear to reflect the context in which they are developed and the rooted commitments of those who do the writing and publishing.

Textbooks as Mirrors of Change

This paper explores data related to American school textbooks to determine what these sources reveal about the educational foundations that lie beneath the dynamics of instructional theory and practice. It views literature in general as a topographical map of social reality in the literate society and textbooks in particular as central arteries--highways and byways. In this sense the textbook constitutes a normative roadmap, displaying the ways of the society in a foundational sense. But life is dynamic, not static. Action is the substance of living and this leads to change. New paths may be created; new patterns may be established. The foundations of social movement can be altered. The premise of this paper is that significant changes, when they occur, will be reflected on the intellectual roadmaps of the society--its textbooks. There is substantial evidence that this has been the case in American society during the twentieth century. A dramatic shift is evident in her moral foundations.

In this paper I will use the term textbook to identify those books used by teachers (this includes parents) to assist them in the instructional process.

Children's Literature

It is common for Americans to buy books for their children. Early on it may be a picture book, later a coloring book, and still later a story book. For children, these books are progenitors of the more formal textbooks they will encounter in schools. Mary Lystad's From Dr. Mather To Dr. Seuss: 200 Years of Children's Literature (1980)[2], examines the children's books in the Library of Congress published between 1721 and 1976. The data reveal that a pronounced shift in emphases occurred in this body of literature during that time frame. Lystad indicates that when the purposes of the books in her study were classified, a radical inversion was apparent. The trend was away from an emphasis on religious principles and appropriate social behavior toward an emphasis on understanding and amusement.[3] (See Table 1)

PURPOSE OF BOOKS BY PUBLICATION DATE (Percent)

| | **Instruction** | | **Understanding** | **Amusement** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Publication Date | Religious Behavior | Social Behavior | | |
| 1721-1795 | 58 | 30 | 0 | 4 |
| 1796-1815 | 55 | 50 | 0 | 9 |
| 1816-1835 | 64 | 31 | 0 | 7 |
| 1836-1855 | 77 | 49 | 0 | 3 |
| 1856-1875 | 68 | 56 | 0 | 17 |
| 1876-1895 | 41 | 37 | 1 | 33 |
| 1896-1915 | 17 | 37 | 4 | 42 |
| 1916-1935 | 2 | 11 | 9 | 71 |
| 1936-1955 | 1 | 6 | 22 | 58 |
| 1956-1975 | 2 | 3 | 27 | 56 |

Table 1

Changes noted in the Lystad study are strikingly similar to observations in other studies. In 1921 M. L. Perkins (University of Chicago), examined 1,291 American school readers used between 1776 and 1920. The trends displayed closely parallels that of the Lystad study.[4] (See Table 2)

| Period | Containing Moral and Religious Content |
|---|---|
| 1776-1786 | 100% |
| 1787-1825 | 50% |
| 1826-1880 | 21% |
| 1916-1920 | 3% |

Table 2

At mid-century, DeCharms and Moeller conducted a content analysis of fourth grade readers used between 1810 and 1950. They reported that in 1810, 16 of 25 randomly selected pages contained moral content. By 1910 only four pages reflected moral instruction and by 1950 this figure was reduced to .06 of a page per 25 pages.[5]

Apparently, changes occurred in the social forces that shaped the content and emphases of these textbooks. The formation of a sacred/secular faultline appears to be manifesting itself in Western culture. Daniel Yankelovich hints at this imagery when he reports the summary of research conducted by him and his associates during the past three decades. Speaking of plate tectonic theory associated with geologic formations he says, "Increasingly in recent years, our studies of the public show the giant plates of American culture shifting relentlessly beneath us. The shifts create huge dislocations in our lives."[6] Marvin Harris responds to the same phenomena with a title statement: Why America Changed: Our Cultural Crises.[7] He uses anthropological data to fuel his analysis. And it was the recognition of such underlying influences that caused Irving Kristol to comment in 1972, "Already an entire generation exists which simply cannot believe that American school textbooks used to extol 'self-denial' as a virtue" and to observe that "Our world is being emptied of its ideal content, and the imposing institutional facade sways in the wind."[8]

Earlier witnesses, nearer the turn of the century and closer to the time of the shift itself, abound. Some hearlded the adoption of the secular view, while others raised voices of warning. In Britain, C. S. Lewis recognized the dramatic change in philosophy underlying a curricular guide prepared for English middle schools at the end of World War II. He challenged the intellectual community that created the new curriculum of the "green book" by proclaiming its implementation would destroy man as a human being. His argument, simply outlined in a three-part essay, was this: If we accept the premises of the new textbooks we will sentence the rising generation to be reared as "men without chests"--undisciplined organisms

with minds and reproductive organs but devoid of hearts, of the faith and feeling that generates self-discipline and empathic response to others. "The way," on the other hand, he maintained had sustained all previous enduring civilized societies in both the East and the West. If modern man chose to follow the new curriculum, Lewis argued, the inevitable result would be "the abolition of man" as a human entity.[9]

Walter Lippman, an eloquent voice in America, disagreed. He spent the decade of the 1920s preparing an argument that concluded thus: "The dissolution of the ancestral order" is nearly complete. "The acids of modernity" have dissolved the old way. The only viable option is to commit modern society to the "foundations of humanism." "In the kind of world I live in," he declared, "I take the humanistic view. . . . I can do no other."[10]

Daniel Kulp II, a prominent sociologist at Columbia Teachers College in 1932, agreed with Lippmann. He introduced one of the earliest courses in Educational Sociology for America's prospective teachers. In his textbook he carefully defined and defended the need for American educators to give up the supernaturalist viewpoint and accept the ground rules of a scientifically based humanism. To the question "Where are we going in education?" he replied, "Education takes its rise in and derives its significance from its functions in societies. Educators can be certain of worths only to the extent that societies are certain of norms and objectives." Kulp acknowledged that educators who proceeded from a religous point of view would not realize "this uncertainty" of which he spoke, "but the educator with the scientific mind will feel it keenly, for he will always remember the relativity of societal values to the three P's--period, place, and people." He taught his students that there were many foundations for moral behavior, not a single declaration from Mt. Sinai. He explained that "conformity to the mores is morality. Thus it is apparent that morality is not a simple quality but is complex and relative. . . .In brief the principle is this: Morality is relative to period, place, and people." When in Rome do what the Romans do, was introduced to American educators as a new standard for school textbooks regarding right and wrong.[11]

Rudyard Kipling opposed Lippmann and Kulp. In his poem "The Gods of the Copybook Headings," written in 1919, he predicted ultimate failure for the new naturalistic system. The materialistic perspective, submitting to "the Gods of the Marketplace," was short-term and is doomed to eventual failure. The new approach was destined to self-destruct. In the end, he

argued, "the Gods of the Copybook Headings"--the source of cliches such as "Idleness is the Devil's workshop" and "A stitch in time saves nine," will prevail.[12]

Textbooks of the Eighties

In recent years the textbook domain has become a battleground. Librarians, school boards, parents, students, teachers, lawyers, judges, publishers, administrators, professors, politicians, laymen and Nobel prize winners have entered into the fray. The issues have appeared in many forms: censorship, creationism, freedom, excellence, science, profanity, pornography, morality, violence and drugs. The news media, journals, courts and professionals in many disciplines have responded with studies, allegations, and proposed solutions. The sometimes mindless and dangerous emotion of the right has frequently clashed against the prevailing blind and destructive arrogance of the left. This has exposed and fostered an alarming rift in America's social structure.[13]

At the beginning of this decade the editors of Daedalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences queried the academic intellect with the question: In America have we reached "The End of Consensus?"[14] Perhaps the breach described by the data reviewed in that journal and the studies cited in this paper has fractured the populace so deeply that Americans can no longer agree on the foundations of education--if they ever did. If contemporay studies of American textbooks tell us anything, they certainly tell us there are grounds for the anxiety felt in all quarters. The content of contemporary textbooks clearly displays the basis for the battle that is raging over the most fundamental human values. It is unlikely that the citizens of this nation will allow their most intimate premises, as diverse as these are, to be long abused or ignored in the public sector without voicing complaint. Educators must "cop out," take sides, or play the difficult role of mediator.

A recent and telling probe by Paul C. Vitz of New York University lays bare the condition of contemporary textbooks.[15] Vitz, funded by the National Institute of Education (USOE), carefully selected and examined 90 current textbooks, from 11 different publishers, which are used to instruct more than 80 percent of America's school children. His objective was to determine what treatment was given to (a) religion and (b) family values in social studies and basal reader textbooks. The tabulated results were cross-validated by the Educational Products Information Exchange (EPIE), an independent, private agency. The 40 textbooks used by grades 1-4 were

examined and reported on as a group. The 10 texbooks used at the fifth grade level were examined and reported on separately, as were the 10 textbooks used at the sixth grade level and the 8 textbooks used at the eleventh and twelfth grade levels. The 22 basal readers were third-and sixth-grade level texts. The scoring was divided between treatment expressed in words (text) and treatment expressed in images (pictures or illustrations). Primary and secondary references were also distinguished and tabulated in the reporting procedures. The results are sobering.

Religion. None of the 40 social studies texts had a single reference to a primary religious activity occurring in contemporary American life. In these books, which averaged two images per page, no book had more than one U. S. image reference to religion--this is less than one religious image per 200 pages. The direct references to American religion are all related to the early colonial period. The researchers noted that the consistent message in these textbooks "is that religion is old fashioned and only for those who are not up to date" (p. 13). In the fifth grade American History textbooks "Not one book noted the extreme liveliness and great importance of religion in American life. This religious energy is never noted. . . ." (p. 23). For example, when one corrects for the number of pages of coverage for each century and notes the references to religion in America in either text or image in all of these books combined the results are instructive. In the few pages referring to the 1600s slightly over 50% made some reference to religion. During the 1700s this figure diminishes to less than 10%. It is 3.4% for the 1800s and 1.2% during the 1900s.

Grade level 6 World History textbooks reflected a strong continuation of the same nonreligious bias. There is a significant neglect of Hebrew history (Old Testament); more attention is given to Greek and Egyptian religion than to ancient Hebrew-Christian history. There is no reference to Jewish life and culture in the last 2,000 years--until the WW II holocaust (p. 30). Likewise, there is a "neglect of the life of Jesus of Nazareth, . . . [which] constitutes one of the more important events in history. Indeed, many would claim his life is the most important single event in the history of the last 2,000 years. Certainly the history of Europe, North and South America, and much of the Near East, Africa, and even Asia cannot be understood without reference to his life and what it has meant--for good or ill--for countless others. Yet none of these books treat the life of Jesus as anything like the important event it has proved to be." A few of these books give him some coverage. Four of the 10 give nothing on his life and teaching. One book summarizes his entire life and teachings in 30 words. Other religions and their leaders are not so neglected. "In these books it is not as though great religious figures are

totally avoided--it is rather that Jesus is" (p. 31-32). Medieval Christianity is likewise avoided, as is Eastern Orthodox Christianity and the Byzantine Empire; Protestantism and Christianity in the modern world are ignored as a living cultural and historical force in today's world or in the past 200 years. Religion is given a significant place in the life of many other cultures (p. 32).

Not one of the history texts used in Grades 11-12 (700-800 pp. in length) acknowledged the great religious energy apparent in the shaping of America (pp. 55-56). Not one of these books seriously covered conservative Protestantism in the last 100 years. None of them seriously covered positive Catholic contributions to American life. Likewise, the positive contributions of American Jews received little or no attention. "One index to the abysmal treatment of religion in American history was the universal tendency to list the dates of important historical events and to leave out from such lists almost all dates referring to religion, especially in the past 100 years" (p. 55).

In the 22 basal readers for Grades 3 and 6, religion was "for all intents and purposes excluded. There were scores of articles on animals, archeology, fossils, or magic, but nowhere on religion, much less about Christianity" (p. 60).

Family. Content and the absence of content related to family and other values in the Vitz study are equally revealing. Families are defined as "the people you live with" (p. 35). In the social studies texts, grade level 1-4, "There is not one text reference to marriage as the foundation of the family. Indeed, not even the word 'marriage' or the word 'wedding' occurred once in the 40 books. . . . Not one of the many families described in these books featured a homemaker--that is a wife and mother as a model. For example, the words 'housewife,' 'homemaker' never occurred in these books. Yet there were countless references to mothers and other women working outside the home in occupations such as medicine, transportation and politics. There was not one citation indicating that the occupation of a mother or housewife represents an important job, one with integrity and providing satisfaction. Further, it is relevant to note that neither the word 'husband' nor 'wife' occurred once in any of these books. It is clear that marriage is not seen as central to the definition of family--a clear example of ideological bias" (p. 37).

Work. The concept of work was portrayed in all of these texts as having two primary meanings. One was to get money; the other was to use the money to buy goods and services to satisfy personal needs and wants.

There was no mention of work as service to others or of having any intrinsic value (p. 42).

Sex Roles. All 40 books had a unisex (sex role reversal) emphasis for the contemporary United States. The content of the basal readers (grade levels 3 and 6) conveys an overt feminist emphasis. "Not one story celebrated motherhood or marriage as a positive goal or as a rich and meaningful way of living. No story showed any woman or girl with a positive relationship to a baby or young child" (p. 68). In contrast to the great literature of Shakespeare, Jane Austin and Louisa May Alcott, which was filled with romance and the desire to marry, only 5 of these 670 stories focused on romance--one of these involved two dogs, the other four are negative aberrations of the romance theme (p. 68). Traditional roles, for both men and women, receive virtually no support, while feminist activities are abundant. "The frequent stories of female successes in these books are all in traditional male activities and are couched in very masculine vocabulary" (p. 69). "Clear attacks on tradtional sex roles, especially concepts of manhood, were common" (p.71).

Patriotism. "Of the 22 books, 17 (over 75%) did not have one patriotic story. None of these patriotic stories had anything to do with American history since1780--that is nothing for over 200 years. Four of the five stories that do appear featured girls and are better described as feminist in orientation, rather than patriotic" (p. 66). The author concludes that "The above characteristics taken together make it clear that these basal readers are so written as to represent a systematic denial of the history, heritage, beliefs, and values of a very large segment of American people" (p. 71).

The organization People for the American Way, a Washington, D. C. based lobby, commissioned a review of major U. S. History textbooks, which it published in 1986.[16] This study examined 31 texts used in grades 8 and 10. The examining panel, chaired by O. L. Davis, University of Texas at Austin, noted that some improvement of quality was apparent, but much more was needed. The compelling observation, however, was not one the panel had anticipated. They were struck by the finding that "religion is simply not treated as a significant element in American life--it is not portrayed as an integrated part of the American value system or as something that is important to individual Americans. The two themes which have been in tension since the earliest colonial times--religious intolerance and religious idealism--are not recognized as essential to understanding the American character." (pp. 2-4).

Another study of reading and history texbooks by Martha A. Hoover, at Brigham Young University (1986), examined available textbooks published by four companies that have been in the business for the past 100 years. Selections of texts at 20-year intervals between 1880 and 1980 were provided by the Center for Research Libraries at Chicago. The analysis of these books regarding social responsibility (patriotic values), individual responsibility (moral values), personal belief statements and others' belief statements regarding moral and religious concepts corroborate the trends and descriptions revealed by those already reported. Hoover concluded that "there has been a shift in content in reading textbooks since about the 1920's. Reference to God, morals, or religion are almost nonexistent in contemporary readers."[17]

The foundations of American education have indeed shifted. American school textbooks now convey a very different philosophy than the one reflected in Noah Webster's Blue Back Speller and William McGuffy's basal readers. This research also sheds light on the censorship issue which has received so much attention in the literature since mid-century. A review of the more than 450 citations in School Library and Texbook Censorship: A Selected Bibliography (1983) shows that nearly every discussion deals with surface issues--language, personal actions, etc. The type of censorship at the foundations level, which the studies above describe, is never mentioned.

The consequences of this shift by academia from a sacred to a secular set of premises and what it means to the future of this nation are becoming an increasingly popular topic of analysis. The work of Yankelovich and Harris has already been mentioned. To this could be added Peter Dobkin Hall's analysis of The Organization of American Culture, 1700-1900 (1982).[18] Hall argues that America's basic problem is rooted in the fact that, contrary to the Founders' expectations, the "political revolution [of 1776] was not accompanied by a moral one." And that by the 1850's the struggle between "right principle" and "self interest" was out of hand. The nation substituted social Darwinism and the public schools for religion. The doctrines to guide America became the doctrines of "social science, economic science, political science, the whole realm of matter including both the basic and biological processes as well as human ones. This was the most one could do in seeking to be the instrument of higher principles." (Italics added.)

The Brookings Institution, a well known "think tank" on the East Coast, recently addressed this issue in a study entitled Religion in American Life (1985).[19] After an extensive review of the origins, interactions and

contemporary outcomes of America's relationship with religion as a source of personal values, the author concludes

> The fundamental flaw of secular civil humanism as a basis for democratic values is that it fails to meet the test of intellectual credibility. . . . The founding fathers after all were right: republican government depends for its health on values that over the not-so-long run must come from religion. . . . Human rights are rooted in the moral worth with which a loving Creator has endowed each human soul, and social authority is legitimized by making it answerable to transcendent moral law. (p. 348.)

On the West Coast a separate team of social scientists, led by the well known and highly respected sociologist Robert N. Bellah, reached similar conclusions in a study compiled at Berkeley. This report, Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life (1985),[20] calls for a revival of public morals and communal values by returning to our "biblical" and "republican" traditions. Another study now in press, In Search of the Republic: Public Virtue and the Roots of American Government (1987),[21] meticulously traces the historical origins of the American experiment. The authors conclude that Alexis de Tocqueville correctly identified the adhesive that made the fashioning of America possible--the unique religious and moral spirit that enveloped the society of the Founders. It is the acknowledgement and promotion of this spirit and the citizenry's responsiblity to honor it that has been deleted from American school textbooks.

Space does not permit further review of the extensive bibliography emerging in support of the need to reexamine our roots and reevaluate the shift that has occurred within the power structure of America's academic intellect in the twentieth century. The evidence in American textbooks suggests the need for a much more careful analysis of the implications and desirability of the contemporary foundations underlying American education. This means more than discussing the administrative, logistical, and financial details associated with education. It means more than outlining the range of philosophical options and identifying their presence or absence in society. It means honest exploration of the personal and social consequences of those options. The focus on reforming educational superstructures such as those identified in A Nation At Risk (1983) and the multitude of subsequent state proposals ignore the foundational issues.

Public education in America was built on a sturdy seat supported by three substantial legs--excellence, equality, and morality. The publicly funded, neighborhood-centered, parent-directed, and professionally assisted school emerged as a hallmark of the American political experiment. No previous educational system has trained as many as well for so long as the public schools in America. But this remarkable system is now under duress, and a cardinal cause of this duress is becoming more and more evident--though many observers continue to wink and look away. America's schools are being victimized by the moral vertigo of the society they serve. One could expect reflections of anxiety and instability in educational functions transacted in a state of acrophobia--where a long and painful fall is a distinct possibility. A sense of security is difficult to retain while educators are perched on a two-legged stool. The wobble factor is too great.[22]

Perhaps those involved with the philosophy and foundations of American education need to reassess carefully the nature and value of its current underpinnings. It may be difficult, but necessary, to resist the reform movement's temptation simply to ride the rhetorical merry go round--deftly moving about the educational carousel, pausing here and there to stroke or lightly adjust the various financial, legal, administrative, and personal forms, while ignoring the erosion of vital foundational underpinnings.

Endnotes


I. Carlos E. Cortes and Dan B. Fleming "Introduction: Global Education and Textbooks," Social Education (Sepember 1986) p. 344.

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3. Ibid. p. 8.

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5. C. Benson and T. Engemann Amoral America (Stanford California: Hoover Institute, Stanford Univerisity Press, 1975) pp. 22-23.

6. Daniel Yankelovich "New Rules in American Life: Searching for Self-Fulfillment in a World Turned Upside Down" Psychology Today (April 1981) pp. 38-39.

7. Marvin Harris Why America Changed: Our Cultural Crises (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981).

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9. C. S. Lewis The Abolition of Man written in 1947 (London: G. Bles, Publishers, 1962)

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12. Rudyard Kipling "The Gods of the Copybook Headings" Oxford Book of 20th Century English Verse, Philip Larkin Editor, 1973.

13. Kenneth L. Woodward and Katherine Taylor "Secular Humanism in the Dock" Newsweek (October 27, 1986). David Ehrenfield The Arrogance of Humanism, 1978.

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15. Paul Vitz "Religion and Traditional Values in Public School Textbooks: An Empirical Study" (Part of Final Report: NIE-G84-0012; Project No. 2-0012; Equity in Values Education, 1986).

16. O. L. Davis Jr. et. al., Looking At History: A Review of Major U. S. History Textbooks (Washington D. C.: People for the American Way, 1986).

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18. Peter Dobkin Hall The Organization of American Culture, 1700-1900: Private Institutions, Elites, and the Origins of American Nationality (New York: New York University Press, 1982) pp. 214-219.

19. A. James Reichley Religion in American Public Life (Washington D. C.: The Brookings Institution, 1985) p. 348.

20. Robert N. Bellah et. al., Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985).

21. Richard Vetterli and Gary Bryner In Search of the Republic: Public Virtue and the Roots of American Government (Totowa, Illinois: Roman and Littlefield, 1987).

22. Neil J. Flinders "America's Public Schools: The Wobble Factor" Brigham Young University, unpublished paper, 1986.